Salisbury University
Nabb Research Center
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Shoreline

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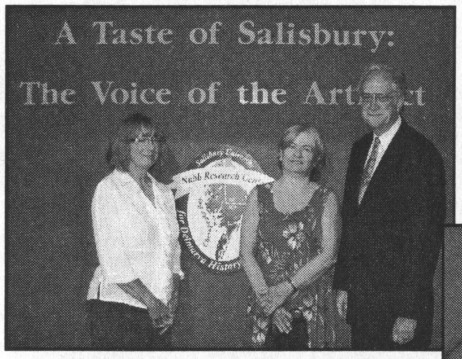
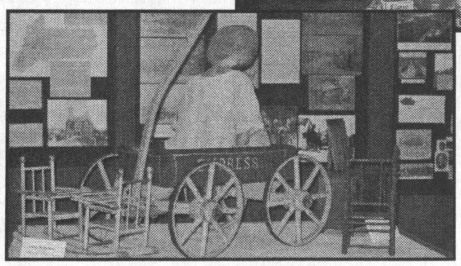
A Visual Taste of Salisbury





Left to right: Nabb staff members, Heather Burnham, Donna Messick, and G. Ray Thompson at the Voice of the Artifact opening; Exhibit of Albert Laws Collection; Harcum-Morris-Kennerly Toy Collection; Victorian gowns from the Wicomico Historical Society Collection.

The Voice of the Artifact Exhibit Series titled "A Visual Taste of Salisbury: 1609-1909" opened Sunday, July 26, at the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art to an enthusiastic audience. The exhibit, opening at the same time as the popular annual Ward Museum's Taste of Salisbury event, was curated by the Nabb staff and volunteers.

Using narrative, photographs and actual objects, the exhibit traced 300 years of development in the Salisbury area. Beginning with the Delmarva landscape prior to European settlement, illustrations of typical Woodland Indians were intermixed with cultural history and actual artifacts to portray life in the Salisbury area prior to European incursions. Following that, the Indian village of Tondotanke (modern-day Tony Tank) was described.

Moving on to the first Anglo encounter, the curators depicted John Smith's 1609 exploration of Delmarva and also the route of trappers and traders as they trekked northward from Virginia's Eastern Shore into the Salisbury area. The beaver pelt trade soon led to exploration and settlement of Europeans along the Wicomico River. Rapidly, Native Americans began to disappear from the area as more and more European settlers sailed up the rivers and creeks and patented land.

This, in turn, led to the physical transformation of the landscape. Timbering began in earnest to supply the construction needs of houses and outbuildings for the new settlers, thus creating cleared fields for cultivation of crops, first tobacco and then corn. As the settlers became more prosperous, large plantations began to ring the Salisbury area. In 1732, Salisbury Town was established at Handy's Landing near Robert Caldwell's mill. Other mills thrived on the creeks along the Wicomico. In the late 18th century, the Revolutionary War created further changes—the Tondotanke area, which had been taken by the Lords Baltimore as their Manor, was broken up into lots and sold.

Salisbury remained a village centered around mills and a store into the early 1800s. In 1817, the first existing plat of Salisbury identified the inhabitants of the growing city. By 1830, steamboats began to expand contacts with the Western Shore. 1860 brought further changes—a national election, a major fire which destroyed much of Salisbury, and the Civil War. In 1867, Salisbury became the county seat of newly-created Wicomico County and railroads made further changes in the physical appearance of Salisbury, with the growth of elaborate housing in the Newtown and Camden areas. In spite of that, Salisbury remained primarily a rural-based economy, tied closely to the river. In 1909, Humphreys Lake Dam burst, opening up a large area for development.

The exhibit traces the 300 years from John Smith's exploration of Delmarva in 1609 to the breaking of the dam in Salisbury in 1909. The Nabb staff hopes that many of our readers will find time to see the exhibit, which will remain in place until September 26!

Free Ward Admission for Nabb Members

For the duration of the "Taste of Salisbury" exhibit at the Ward Museum, Nabb Research Center members are admitted free with proof of current membership. Please sign the guestbook at the Museum and note Nabb membership. The exhibit ends on September 27, 2009.

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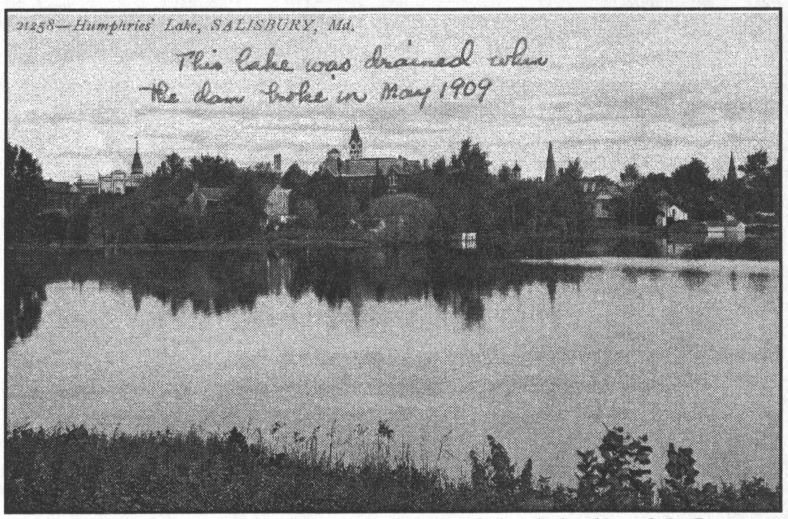
"We're History...Without You"

The Breaking of the Dam in Salisbury, May 29, 1909

By Philip "Pete" Cooper

[*On May 29, 2009, 100 years after the breaking of the dam, Pete Cooper and George Chevallier were invited by Mayor Jim Ireton to detail the history of the lake such as they remembered it. Mr. Cooper's brief discussion of the history of the dam on that occasion is presented here.*]



Postcard of Humphreys Lake and downtown Salisbury before the breaking of the Dam

In the early days of Salisbury, William Venables of Laurel, DE, successfully petitioned the General Assembly of Maryland for a land grant on which to build a grist mill along with a dam and causeway spanning the south side of the Wicomico River from the area which is today Market Street to Upton Street. On the crest of the dam was an oyster-shell road flanked on both sides by giant willow trees. This provided access to Salisbury from Nutter's District by way of South Division Street and Snow Hill Road.

The dam impounded a large, beautiful body of water known as Humphreys Lake, the headwaters of which reached up along Beaver Dam Creek to Schumaker Pond. The Upton Street School (until recently the area of the *Daily Times* Building) dominated the south bank of the lake and the north bank lay close behind the county court house. It was bounded along the water's edge by Water Street.

On May 29, 1909, at 2:39 p.m., out of the blue and without obvious cause, the dam broke. It was a crushing blow to both city and county governments. The rush of water and debris downstream also removed from service the "Humpback" Bridge at Camden Avenue, effectively cutting off all access to Salisbury from the south and east except for limited use of the Eastern Shore Railroad Right of Way.

Mr. Humphreys defaulted on the reconstruction of the dam. Salisbury made a too-feeble effort to restore the dam and this, too, ended in failure. Finally, the Salisbury Realty Company acquired the entire pond bed and through years of neglect, this once beautiful landmark was reduced to an overgrown bog land of mud, stumps and trash with a small stream running through it. Neither the city nor the county had the organizational structure to deal effectively with a crisis of this magnitude. [*Following the dispersal of the lake bottom land, the downtown section of East Main Street was built and the city park and zoo areas were developed.*]